

## **Fort Massac: Reliving History**

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In Illinois, as well as the rest of America, some of the most historically significant sites that still stand are the forts of the revolution. The memories of ancient battles and past heroes are woven into these forts' very foundations. Among the great old forts stands Fort Massac, a legend of Illinois's history. Fort Massac's legacy is filled with important events, including its transformation from a fort into the first park in the Illinois state park system. Today, Fort Massac State Park is known for its historic re-enactments and family activities. However, the fort's past is just as important as its present.

Even before Fort Massac was formally founded, Native Americans utilized its strategic location along the Ohio River. In the *Emigrant's Guide or Pocket Geography of the Western States and Territories* (1818) it is stated that:

This fort stands on a high dry bank, and commands a delightful view of the Ohio. The great breadth of the river, and the long and easy bend it makes, without any obstructions for 11 miles above and 5 below, gives a most noble perspective to the eye, and a sentiment of admiration to the imagination.

With such a commanding view of the Ohio River, it is logical that many different forces have taken advantage of the fort's position. One such force, led by the Spanish conquistador Hernando DeSoto, set up a defense at this site. After exploring much of South America, DeSoto landed an expedition on the Florida coast in 1539. From this point, DeSoto led the biggest expedition of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries through

the modern day United States. While traveling through what would later be named Illinois, this expedition used the location that would become Fort Massac to set up a temporary defense against hostile Indian tribes. After DeSoto's force left the fort to continue their exploration of the surrounding lands, Indians again took advantage of this defensive position.

Various Indian tribes utilized the fort's location until the French gained control of it in 1757, during the French and Indian War. At this time, the French made this fortress into the Fort De L'Ascension. To honor their Minister of Colonial Affairs, the French renamed it Fort Massiac, which was later anglicized to Fort Massac. After the French and Indian War ended, the fortification was burned by the Chickasaw tribe, and rebuilt by Britain's Forty-Second Royal Highland Regiment. The British left this fort weakly garrisoned however, making this important location vulnerable during the Revolutionary War.

During the Revolution, Colonel George Rogers Clark realized the importance of Fort Massac. Clark, whose brother later became famous in the Lewis and Clark expedition, devised a plan to capture Fort Massac and used it as a strategic base of operations in Illinois. Important figures such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson supported Clark's plan, and Clark was then promoted to colonel in the Revolutionary Army.

By 1778, the revolutionary forces already controlled much of Illinois. The only major challenge that remained was to capture Kaskaskia, the capitol of the Illinois Territory, from the British. In June 1778, Clark led his regiment of Rebels to British-controlled Fort Massac and captured it. From this strategic position Clark regrouped his

men, and led them to Fort Kaskaskia in two separate regiments. In a brilliant maneuver, Clark had his two regiments approach Kaskaskia from opposite directions, making his forces seem much larger than they were. By using this tactic, Clark captured Kaskaskia from the British without firing a shot. With this great task completed, Clark was able to capture all of Illinois for the United States. Fort Massac was a vital piece of Clark's plan to gain control of the Illinois Territory, and in this way, it played a small but important role in the American Revolution.

With such deep history, the Daughters of the American Revolution deemed it necessary to preserve Fort Massac for future generations. This group bought 24 acres surrounding the fort in 1903, which the state of Illinois bought on November 5, 1908, to create the state's first park. Archaeological excavations were conducted around the fort from 1939-1942 and again in 1966, 1970, and 2002. The excavations showed the specific position of each of the forts that had been built on this location, and provided clues to what life had been like there.

Built from the information gathered in these excavations, a reconstruction of the 1802 American fort now stands on the park grounds. Fort Massac State Park's 1,450-acre area is currently comprised of two military barracks, three block houses, officer's quarters, a large well, and a stockade. This replica of the old Fort Massac was built to promote learning of revolutionary times and ways of life. In order to accomplish this task, Fort Massac has several "living history weekends" every year and is also host to the Fort Massac Encampment for two days of each October. More than 80,000 visitors come to the Fort Massac Encampment annually to experience recreations of life in the 1700s, as well as to perform in battle reenactments. The fort is also open to the public every day

and educational or tour groups can be scheduled for the site. The park provides an educational, family-friendly environment with available picnicking, hiking, and camping. Hunting and fishing are also allowed in some areas, and boating is permitted along the Ohio River. With its modern attractions and fascinating heritage, Fort Massac is notable in Illinois's development.

Fort Massac's history, as well as the activities offered by the park, help to make it one of the state's most important landmarks. Both beautiful and meaningful, Illinois's first state park has been, and will continue to be, important as a learning and entertainment center in southern Illinois. [From Anonymous, *Emigrant's Guide or Pocket Geography of the Western States and Territories*; Fern Armstrong and Frank Leonard, *Short History of Fort Massac: Two Essays*; Lynn Bailey and John Fortier, *Historian's Report Concerning the Feasibility of a Reconstruction At Fort Massac State Park, Illinois*; Victor Hogg, Margaret K. Brown and John B. Fortier, *Historic Fort Massac*; Charles Kelly, John Fortier and Lynn R. Bailey, *Fort Massac Project*; George W. May, *Massac Pilgrimage*; Paul Maynard, *Summary Report of the Archaeological Research and Preliminary Restoration, Fort Massac State Park, Metropolis, Illinois*; Rose M. Scott, *George Rogers Clark [a Poem, Together with an Account of the Sesqui-Centennial Held at Metropolis, Ill., June 28, 29, 30 and July 1, 1928]*; and Sourbadon Verges, *Translation of French Specifications for Fort Massac, Illinois, on the Ohio River, 1745.*]